

How might media aid and empower young people to manage armed political conflict?



The number of children who live in conflict zones is staggering: [eighty-one percent live in a conflict-ridden state – 1.8 billion souls](#). Yet when scholars discuss children, media and conflict, they tend to focus on peace-zone children and their engagement with news about conflicts. For [www.parenting.digital](#), [Yael Warshel](#) discusses the need to shift the focus to young people in conflict zones and recognize the important role media may play in mediating and moderating conflict zones.

The [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), ratified in 1989, did not include provision for internet rights, then still in its nascent commercial stages. The adoption of [General Comment 25](#) by the UN in March 2021 concerning children's rights in the digital environment [aims to change that](#). It implores member states to consider children's rights to access the internet and [broader media](#). Children's rights to access [appropriate and desired online](#) platforms, obtain information, and, conversely, voice their needs in ways *they* deem relevant, [have not been equitably extended](#). Their communication rights more broadly under [Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) have yet to be realized and where conflict-zone based young people are considered specifically, the [neglect of those rights and yet pressing need](#) is most starkly apparent.

Children in conflict zones

[Children](#), as well as [youth](#), are the population most affected by political conflict. Despite forming a demographic majority in most conflict zones, they are not at the forefront of related media scholarship. As humanitarian interventions, media represent accessible and non-threatening tools to forge peace. Moreover, they serve as novel methodological and policy backdoors to reveal young people's intergroup attitudes, political opinions, and practices, crucial to including their perspectives in research and policy.

Yet the potential role media may play for children and youth implicated by conflict has not been given critical attention. To better ensure media scholarship addresses children's lives, I have proposed the new transdisciplinary approach of ["Children and Media in Conflict Zones"](#). This approach, grounded in a call for fieldwork, critically advocates for the inclusion of children living in, displaced by and/or born of sexual violence within conflict zones.

The Children, Media and Conflict Zones scholarly approach

The majority of children, media and conflict scholarship, ironically, analyzes peace-zone children, emphasizing psychological effects on or reception of non-fiction violence, namely news *about conflict*, on or by those who do not experience conflict. Given its focus, such scholarship has been unable to shed light on the effects viewing non-fiction violence has on conflict-zone young people who experience violence. Moreover, it cannot provide us with insight into what other ways media play roles in their lives.

The children, media and conflict literature posits children as passively enduring conflict to, at best, become resilient in its face. By contrast, the transdisciplinary framework of children, media and conflict zones enables a holistic understanding of how conflict-zone children interpret, respond to, play with, or use media to shelter themselves from and mediate conflict. Separately, it is also necessary to consider how youth express their opinions about conflict. Scholars can use this framework to produce evidence to improve the lives of young people who experience violence daily.

Contextualizing conflict zones

To best address conflict zone populations, it is necessary to start from empirical evidence that contextualizes conflicts and determines regions, states, forms of political conflict, and populations that require the most address. Popular and scholarly assumptions have assumed that the Middle East requires the most attention but [early warning political conflict analyses](#) have [found that not to be the case](#). Instead, the focus should first be on [Asia and Africa](#). The largest number of children living within a 50 km range of violence [also reside in these regions](#): 195 million in Asia, 152 million in Africa, followed by 35 million in the Middle East. Indian children represent the [largest number of conflict-affected children](#) within a single state, followed by Pakistani, Nigerian, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, and Filipino children. Between 2013 and 2015, deaths in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq combined made up [three-fourths of all battle deaths globally](#). Historically India, followed by Myanmar/Burma [long had the most self-determination conflicts of any state](#). The conflict in the Congo, as one example, is [estimated](#) to have been among the deadliest since the end of WWII: from [3 to 6 million children died](#). Children under age 5, who constitute almost one-fifth of the population, comprised [nearly half of all deaths](#). Intra-state ethnopolitical inter-group conflicts [are the most prevalent](#). Terrorism, by contrast, has generated the [smallest casualty figures](#). Combatants rather than civilians are killed at [the highest rate](#) and child combatants, who serve in [40% of armed forces](#) around the world, are among them.

Harm incurred by conflict is born from casualty figures as some of the large sample data measure but this is not the only problem. Children's everyday lives are also adversely altered. Thus, it's important to address a myriad of children who experience conflict zones life. Intersectionally, that means not only addressing combatants (child soldiers and terrorist/freedom fighters) but also victims born of rape, girl-mothers, externally displaced refugees, and internally displaced and borderlands children. Understanding the range of conflict-affected children and their varied experiences will better allow for consideration of what media might be made most relevant and how best to engage them.

Using media in conflict zones

By employing the children, media and conflict zones approach, we can reset the direction of scholarship to answer more relevant questions like, could screens be used to re-locate conflict-zone children's leisure away from armed confrontation to safe locations? In [a previous study](#), I found that Gaza-based Palestinian refugee parents used TV to protect their children from the Israeli military and prevent them from joining Palestinian militant organizations. Israeli parents used it to protect their children from being harmed by or joining neighbourhood crime. Both consciously conceptualized television as an artefact, employing it functionally, without connection to or concern for the contents displayed across its screens.

Similarly, scholars might answer other relevant questions like how might Filipino, Nigerian or Iraqi children exploit media technologies and associated 'distance education' to improve their access to education when physically interrupted by conflict? Or given that motivation among Congolese child soldiers to reconcile with their former enemies [was found](#) to have moderated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) levels and considering Congolese youth hold a [critical relationship with fashion](#), had a messaging campaign using shirts as its branding medium been employed to help persuade former child soldiers to 'Reconcile for the Congo?', would their PTSD rates have been lowered, in turn, improving their societal reintegration? Or given that 'public' opinion polls [typically do not assess](#) young people's opinions, how might systematic analyses of Indian youth expressions through rap, informing us about what it means to have grown up amid [any one](#) among the numerous self-determination conflicts there, better help brainstorm resolutions?

Conclusion

Should scholars adopt a children, media and conflict zones approach, questions like these could be answered. Practitioners, activists and policymakers, including youth among them, might in turn be empowered with the needed evidence to better use media to mediate conflict zones.

The children, media and conflict zones approach advocates [problematizing the notion of conflict](#) by treating it as real, relying on empirical evidence about it, together with interpretations of the subtle mundane manifestations of the structural violence of conflict zones life. Using this approach enables scholars to determine which children to include, whose perspectives to give voice to, and how best to aid and empower those voices through media. Finally, the approach also proposes considering that as context, types of political conflicts not only differ but are neither static. They can be managed, and young people can and are part of efforts to use media to bring about change.

First published at www.parenting.digital, this post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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